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Forest health, safety project aims to reduce wildfire risk in Los Gatos Creek Watershed

Community groups partner to clear vegetation in the area



The Los Gatos Creek Watershed Collaborative started clearing out brush and dead trees last year as part of its grant-funded project. The collaborative is made up of the Santa Clara FireSafe Council, San Jose Water, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District and Santa Clara County Parks. (Photo courtesy of Los Gatos Creek Watershed Collaborative)

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In 2020, wildfires burned more than [2 million acres](#) of land in California.

The SCU Lightning Complex fires burned nearly 400,000 acres of land across five Bay Area counties and destroyed more than 100 structures, and the LNU Lightning Complex Fire overtook 375,209 acres of land in the North Bay.

In an effort to prevent similar devastation, a group of Santa Clara County organizations banded together to protect the Los Gatos Creek Watershed, which sits along the base of the Santa Cruz Mountains and holds water for more than 100,000 residents in the Lexington and Elsmar reservoirs.

The Los Gatos Creek Watershed Collaborative was awarded \$7.5 million in CAL FIRE forest health grant funding in 2021 to lower the risk of fast-spreading wildfires in the watershed's 955 acres.

"Everyone has to have skin in this game. If you want to reduce wildfires...everyone's got to get involved," said Seth Schalet, chief executive officer of the Santa Clara FireSafe Council. "What happens if the water goes away? What happens if the reservoir systems get damaged or the pipes melt and get carcinogens from wildfires in the water, how does that affect life in Santa Clara County?"

To reduce that risk, the collaborative is working to manage the vegetation that grows in the watershed, like underbrush, non-native species and smaller trees. Some trees contracted diseases like sudden oak death, which dries out a tree and makes it quicker to burn and spread fire.

The most deadly fires, Schalet said, are those that quickly spread through tree canopies.

"If there is a wildfire, we want to keep it lower to the ground, because the lower to the ground the flames are, the shorter the flame length of a fire, (and) perhaps the slower the spread," Schalet said.

The idea is to bring the forest back to a state that it might have looked like before industrialization, when natural wildfires would occur and burn out in a less devastating way.

In 2022, the collaborative focused on planning and creating a strong communication system for the various partners involved, and began clearing 45 acres of brush.

Project manager Stephen Harrington said the project is estimated to be completed in 2025.

The collaborative is made up of the Santa Clara FireSafe Council, San Jose Water, Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District and Santa Clara County Parks. This project marks the first time all the organizations have worked together.

Harrington said he hopes it won't be the last. The collaborative has outlined some goals in the future, like investing in fire detection cameras.

"One of the more rewarding parts of the project, honestly, is to see that regional collaboration between these big entities," Harrington said. "They've been doing an exceptional job in this process."

CalFire announced another round of grants, including forest health grants, last month. Schalet said the FireSafety Council plans to apply for that funding for the collaborative to continue working together and involve more partners.

This work can also be used to help the county apply for federal and state grants, Schalet said. The county is tasked with creating a safety plan, which outlines responses to various threats, including wildfires.

"If we do this well and we do this right, this will allow hopefully for greater opportunity for the county to go out and secure future grant funding for wildfire resiliency and wildfire safety," Schalet said.